# Change and Tradition in Literacy Instruction in a Samoan American Community

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## Introduction

Ancient Polynesians have captured the imagination of the West with their adventurous voyages in outrigger canoes across hundreds if not thousands of miles of ocean. Filled with pigs, fowl, taro roots, breadfruit, and a rich oral tradition, these canoes carried Polynesian culture to islands throughout the Pacific (Howard & Borofsky, 1989). Over a period of 3,000 years, settlers adapted to the new environments, producing the variety of cultures that comprises Polynesia (Kirch, 1984). Today, despite European and American colonization, the dissemination of Polynesian cultures has not ended. Polynesians migrate in large numbers to the countries of their colonizers—Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. With them, they continue to bring taro, bread-

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fruit, fine mats, and their oral tradition. These days they also bring a literate tradition, introduced to them by Christian missionaries. They carry with them their Bible and their memories of how they learned to read it. This is a story of how these memories organize community and school among people of Polynesian descent now living in an urban setting. We follow the voyage of a literacy tool from the Samoan Islands to a Samoan community in Los Angeles. Samoans call this tool the *Pi Tautau*.

In the 1830s, the London Missionary Society established itself in the Samoan islands. They created a Samoan orthography and a Samoan language version of the Christian Bible (Huebner, 1987; Turner, 1861; Williams, 1832). They established pastor's schools to transmit literacy skills necessary to read this important religious text. These schools survive to this day. Nearly every village has a pastor's school run by the Congregational Christian Church, the local successor to the London Missionary Society.

This historical phenomenon is by no means unique. For centuries, religion has promoted literacy. Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike rely on written scriptures and instruct their congregations how to read passages within them. The transition to adulthood among Jews is marked by demonstration that the child can read a portion of the Holy Torah. For Muslims and Christians, religion is synonymous with the written Word, and missionization with spreading the Word. For Christians spreading the Word is achieved primarily through diffusion and translation of the Bible, creating new orthographies and new literate populations throughout the world. Far more than public schools, religious schools serve as the cornerstone of literacy across nations.

# Church Literacy in a Western Samoan Village

Imagine yourself a child growing up in a Samoan village. From infancy you are carried on the hips and backs of your older siblings to church services. Your older sibling holds on to you with one hand and with the other holds up the Bible or Book of Hymns.

Starting around the age of four, you walk to the church compound several afternoons a week to learn how to read letters and numbers.

For over 150 years, in every pastor's school, this initial literacy instruction is accomplished in exactly the same way, through what is called the *Pi Tautau*. Published by the Congregational Christian Church, the *Pi Tautau* is a large poster displaying the Samoan alphabet, with Arabic and Roman numerals along the bottom. Each letter is accompanied by a picture of an object beginning with that letter. As the literacy lesson begins, you sit cross-legged on the floor with the other children in front of the teacher, who is seated on a chair, holding the *Pi Tautau* on her lap. Over time you come to understand what is expected of you. Each lesson the teacher points to the picture on the top left corner and asks the class to

collectively recite first the letters and their corresponding images, then the letters alone, and finally the Arabic and Roman numerals from one to ten.

#### Excerpt # 1. Pastor's school class, Western Samoa, September 1989.<sup>2</sup>

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Teacher: faitau fa'atasi le tâtou Pî. e::.
     (let us) read together our Pî (Tautau), okay?
Children:((start early)) 'a:: 'ato
     a (for) ato (basket)...
Teacher: faitau- fa'atali-fa'atali faitau.
     read- wait-wait read.
((she hits the first letter/image on Pi Tautau with ruler))
Children: ((in unison)) 'a;; 'ato, 'e;; 'elefane, 'i;; ipu, 'o;; ofu, 'u;; uati
     a (for) ato (basket), e (for) elefane (elephant), i (for) ipu (cup), u (for) uati
              (watch)
fa:: fagu, ga:: gata, la:: logo.
     (for) fagu (bottle), g (for) gata (snake), l (for) logo (bell).
mo:: moa. no:: nofoa, sa:: solofanua.
     m (for) moa (chicken), n (for) nofoa (chair), s (for) solofanua (horse)
ti:: ta'avale, ((raising pitch)) vi::: 7 va'a!
     t (for) ta'avale (car), v (for) va'a (boat)
he:: Herota, ka:: kirikiti, ro:: rapiti.
     h (for) Herota (Herod), k (for) kirikiti (cricket), r (for) rapiti (rabbit)
((teacher continues to point with ruler to the rest of the chart))
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While a few of these images are familiar to you, for example, the chicken, the horse, and the car; many of the images are new. You have never seen an elephant, a rabbit, a snake, or an ocean liner and you don't know who Herod is. Even the images you can identify are not common ones. The image for the word 'ato 'basket' is not the one you see your siblings carry, but rather the basket sold in the capital to tourists. The image for the word 'ofu 'clothes' is not the traditional 'ie lavalava, the sheet of cloth villagers wrap around their lower body, but rather a Western style of dress reserved for special occasions.

The Pi Tautau in this sense introduces not only the alphabet and the numbers, but also images associated with a way of life that is peripheral to village life. In a Samoan village, the experience of the Pi Tautau opens a door to worlds associated with Christianity and foreign objects (Duranti & Ochs, 1986).

### Samoan Communities in the United States

While most Samoans do not leave their villages, thousands have emigrated (Shankman, 1993). Within the United States, Hawaii, and California house large Samoan communities (Franco, n.d.). Currently more than 90,000 ethnic Samoans

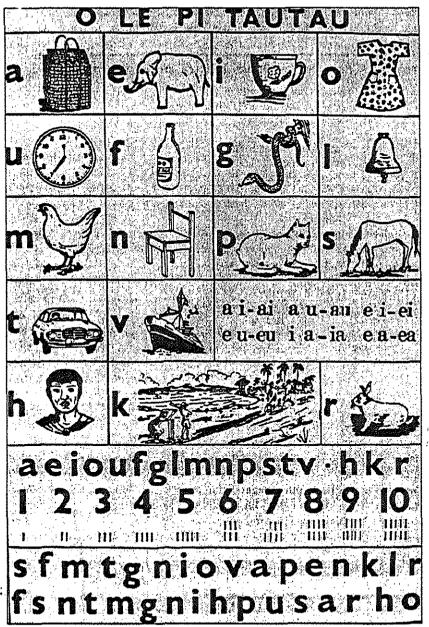


Figure 1. The Samoan alphabet chart, known as the Pi Tautau

live in California, most born and raised here (Pouesi, 1994). Like other ethnic communities in this country, Samoans are proud of their culture and grapple with the problem of transmitting their heritage to their children—children who have never experienced life in a Samoan village and have limited knowledge of Samoan language. In this struggle for language and culture maintenance, the *Pi Tautau* plays a major role.

Wherever Samoans have moved in large numbers, they have formed strong local communities based around a Samoan church. An important component of these churches is the religious school, where, like in a Samoan village, very young children are introduced to the Samoan alphabet and numbers. It is important for researchers concerned with the relation between community and school to recognize that religious school may have an entirely different relation to a community than public school (Cohen & Lukinsky, 1985; Zinsser 1987). Indeed, religious schools are far more continuous with the values and social organization of the Samoan community than are public schools. Researchers working on

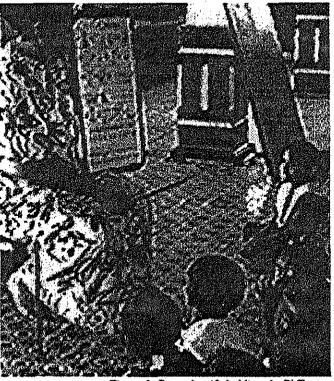


Figure 2. Pastor's wife holding the Pi Tautau in front of children in a Western Samoan village.

literacy have focussed predominantly on the relation between home and public school (e.g. Chandler et al., 1986; Heath, 1983; Leichter, 1974; Philips, 1972, 1983; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 1984; McDermott & Gospodinoff, 1981) rather than on the relation between home and religious schools. In this article we consider the complex social and historical intersection of home, school, and community as represented by and constituted through church literacy.

In an urban environment in which the Samoan children are in daily contact with members of so many other ethnic communities, the church compound provides a haven for the preservation of what their parents and grandparents define as the "Samoan way of life" or fa`aSâmoa. In the Samoan Congregational Church in Los Angeles, language and culture maintenance among Samoan children is accomplished through several means. Unlike public schools, all the teachers in the religious school are ethnic Samoans. Inside the church compound, adults often wear a formal style of clothes common in Samoa: The pastor wears a tailored sarong called 'pocket 'ie' and women wear long white dresses (see Figure 3) or elegant sarong-like suits called puletasi (see Figure 4).

Children are also likely to see visitors from the Samoan Islands—perhaps a guest pastor or a church group from Western or American Samoa.

On Sunday and during the week the church involves neighborhood children in diverse activities that resonate with life in the Samoan islands. Children witness weddings, funerals, and other rites of passage where fine mats are distributed and



Figure 3. Members of the choir dressed in white during a church service in Southern California.

traditional oratory can be heard. Children practice Samoan dances for fundraising festivities. Children and adults sing Christian songs in both Samoan and English. They accompany songs in both languages with traditional Samoan body movements. In this manner English code interfaces with Samoan expressive gesture. The actual church service is almost completely in Samoan.

For the many children who have never been to a Samoan village, the church experience augments the home in socializing children into what it means to be Samoan. The church compound is in fact called by some the nu'u lotu, literally 'church village' and by others the 'urban village.' In Los Angeles, the village metaphor is reinforced by the layout of the church compound, which resembles the plan of a typical village with buildings circling a central ceremonial ground or malae (Figure 5). In this case, the malae is a parking lot and the buildings that surround it are the church and a large hall that houses the Sunday school as well as a number of other educational and recreational activities.

# Church Literacy in a Samoan American Church

Before the Sunday service, children five years old and younger attend religious school. As part of their lesson, these children are expected to recite and master the very same *Pi Tautau* used in pastors' schools throughout the Samoan islands. Just like children in traditional villages, Samoan children in Los Angeles recite the letters, words, and numbers represented in the *Pi Tautau*.

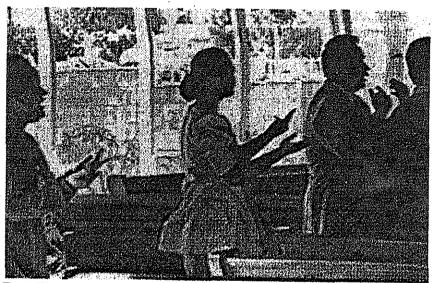


Fig. 4. Woman with puletasi accompanying singing in church with hand gestures (1993).

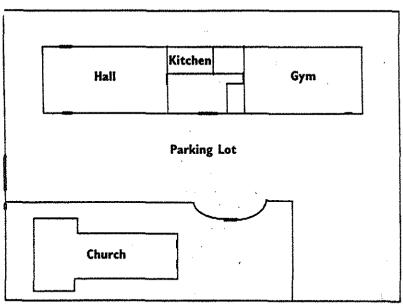


Figure 5. Map of the Church compound in Los Angeles.

#### Excerpt # 2. Sunday School in Southern California, February 28, 1993.

Teacher: Oka:y? Everybody real loud. ((points to the alphabet chart))

Girl: ((softly)) a:::

Teacher: o::ne ...two:: ... three::...

Teacher: a//:: ato

a (for) basket

Students: ato

ato (basket)

Students: e::: clefane

e (for) elefane (elephant)

Students: i::: ipu

i (for) ipu (cup)

Students:o::: //ofu

o (for) ofu (dress)

Teacher: ofu

Students: u::: //uati

u (for) uati (watch)

Teacher: uati

Teacher: //fa::: fagu

f (for) fagu (bottle)

Students: fa::: fagu

f (for) fagu (bottle)



Figure 7. Teacher and students reciting the Samoan alphabet in Southern California.

Teacher: //ga::: gata ga (for) gata (snake)

Students: ga:::gata

g (for) gata (snake)

Teacher: //la::: logo

I (for) logo (bell)

Students: la:::logo

l (for) logo (bell)

Teacher: //mo::: moa

m (for) moa (chicken)

Students: mo::: moa

m (for) moa (chicken)

Teacher: nu:::: nofoa

n (for) nofoa (chair)

Students: nu::: nofoa

Teacher: //pi::: pusi

p (for) pusi (cat)

Students: 'pi::: pusi p (for) pusi (cat) Teacher: //sa::: solofanua s (for) solofanya (horse) Students: sa::: solofanua s (for) solofanua (horse) Teacher: //ti::: ta'avale t (for) ta'avale (car) Students: ti::: taavale t (for) ta'avale (car) Teacher: //vi::: va'a v (for) va'a (boat) Students: vi::: va'a v (for) va'a (boat) Teacher: //he:: ka:: ro:: h.k.rStudents: he::: ka::: ro::: Teacher: he::: ka:: ro::: Girl: I got a:-Teacher: ta:://si:. one. Students: tassi:: one. Teacher: //lua::. two. Students: lu:a:. Teacher: ((points to number on poster)) Students: to:lu:, fa::, lima::, o:no:, fi:tu:, va:lu:, i:va:, sefu:lu: three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, Teacher: ((looks up)) okay. I'm gonna turn you over to Annette now and Anette is going to give you guvs your Bible lesson ((folds poster)) okay? Girl: okay. Boy: okay.

At first this routine looks much the same as the one performed in the Samoan village. The *Pi Tautau* is thus an instrument and a symbol of continuity and even more. It is a tangible and safe anchor for keeping the children of Samoan descent in Southern California connected to the language of their parents and grandparents. But a closer look at the recitation of the *Pi Tautau* belies important discontinuities with its village counterpart. The context of the *Pi Tautau* has changed and it is context that gives meaning to what we do and say.

Most importantly, the linguistic repertoires of the children in Los Angeles and in the Samoan village are not the same. Whereas children who go to the village pastor's school speak Samoan before they are exposed to the *Pi Tautau*, Samoan

children in Los Angeles typically have only rudimentary knowledge of Samoan when they begin attending religious school. Some of the teachers as well do not speak Samoan as their first language, but rather have learned it later in life to more fully participate and gain status in the local Samoan community. This explains how at times certain Samoan American children might know more than their teacher. In one of the videotaped interactions, a child corrects a teacher who mispronounced the name of the letter "r"—she said "re" instead of "ro". This would be unthinkable in Samoa.

Partly as a consequence of such linguistic insecurity, teachers in Southern California use English to introduce and explain the *Pi Tautau*. Only the actual recitation of the *Pi Tautau* is carried out in Samoan. This code-switch from English to Samoan marks the *Pi Tautau* as linguistically distinct from other genres of discourse that comprise the Bible lesson. This linguistic shift is absent in village Pastors' schools, where Samoan is the sole language of instruction.

These differences in linguistic repertoire shape the meaning and function of the *Pi Tautau*. Whereas in the Samoan village, the *Pi Tautau* is used to instruct literacy, in Southern California it is used to teach children how to speak as well as how to read Samoan. Thus, while the tool—the *Pi Tautau*—is constant across Samoa and Southern California, the instructional activity is not.

That in Southern California the *Pi Tautau* is a tool for teaching spoken Samoan is manifest in certain instructional practices. The most striking is that the teachers sometimes ask the children to recite the *Pi Tautau* without visual access to the chart itself, which is often unavailable. As the next example illustrates, at these moments the children are not engaged in reading but rather are reciting from memory the sequence of letters and words that comprise the *Pi Tautau*.

## Excerpt # 3. Sunday School in Southern California, May 30, 1993.

((Two teachers and five students sitting at a table in the hallway are reciting the alphabet without the poster, the second teacher is the same as teacher in Excerpt # 2, but here she is acting as an assistant))

All: mo::: moa, nu:::: nofoa, pi::: pusi

m (for) moa (chicken) n (for) nofoa (chair) p (for) pusi (cat)

sa::: solofanua, ti::: ta'avale, vi::: va'a

s (for) solofanua (horse), t (for) ta'avale (car), v (for) va'a (boat)

he:: Herota, ka:: kirikiki, ro:: rapiti

h (for) Herota (Herod), k (for) kiritiki (cricket, the game), r (for) rapiti (rabbit)

Teacher-1: What is "rapiti"? What is that word class?

Student: Rabbit

Teacher-1: What is it Sike?

Sike: Rabbit.

Teacher-1: Everybody what is that word?

Students: RA:BBIT!

As shown in the last part of this segment, the activity of reciting the Pi Tautau can occome a second language more than a literacy lesson. Whereas pastors' school teachers in Samoa ask the children to label objects depicted in the Pi Tautau, teachers in the Los Angeles religious school ask the children to translate words referring to objects in the Pi Tautau from Samoan to English. In the segment just shown, the teacher asks the class "What is "rapiti"?" to which one child responds in English "rabbit." Thus while village teachers point to a picture and ask, "What is this?", Los Angeles teachers ask, "What does this mean in English?"

The Pi Tautau differs across communities in other ways as well. In our earlier work (Duranti & Ochs, 1986), we saw the Pi Tautau and the activities that surround it as an instrument of westernization. Not only does the Pi Tautau chart depict objects such as Cola bottles and ocean liners, Pi Tautau instruction introduces village children to patterns of adult-child interaction associated with Euro-American societies. For example, the interaction around reading in the pastor's school is not only text-centered. It is also child-centered and, as the children become older, individual oriented. This type of interaction is illustrated in Excerpt 4 from a Pastor's school class in Western Samoa (see Figure 8).

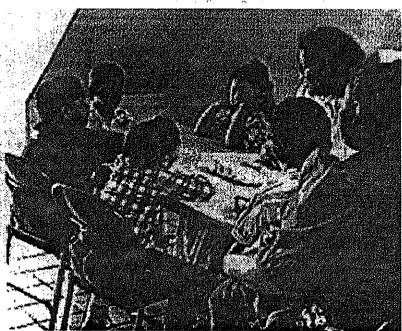


Figure 7. Teachers and students recite the Samoan alphabet without the Pi Tautau during a Sunday school class in Southern California.

# Excerpt # 4. Pastor's school, Western Samoa, April 1981. Children are asked to read a verse each from the Bible.

Pastor: Luka luasefulu ma le tolu, faia upu sefulumaletolu... Luke twentythree, verse thirteen... ia' amata faitau amata ia Teresa. So starts...reading...Teresa starts. Teresa: ((reading)) "ona fa'apotopoto lea e Pilato le 'aufaitaulaga sili. "and when Pilate had called together the chief priests ma le faipule, ma le nu'u." and the rulers and the people" ((after several children have each read one verse, it is Pato's turn)) Pato: ((reading slowly)) "ona toe tau//tala-" "and spoke again-" Pastor: leo tele Pato. speak loud Pato. Pato: ((reading)) "ona toe tau-..tala ... atu ai lea 'o Pilato.... "Pilate...spoke...again then..." ina...ina 'ua fia..." ((stops)) "in...order...to..." Boy: ((whispers something)) Pastor: sipela le 'upu. spell the word. Pato: ((spells the word)) ti-a-ti-a-la-a-i-nu-a. t-a-t-a-l-a-i-n-a. Pastor: o le 2? What is it? Other students: ((whispers various words)) Pastor: ti-a...ti-a...-la-a-i-nu-a. 'o le a? ... t-a...t-a...-l-a-i-n-a. What is it?.... 'aua le pisa fo'i le isi. the rest (of you) be quiet. A. Pato: ((reading)) "ta-la-ina,...tala//ina" "release, relea//se" Pastor: fai. say (it). Pato: "talaina atu...lesû." "release...Jesus."

Individual children must be able to read a letter, a number, a word, or a verse, without relying on the help of their peers. When a child cannot complete the task, other children can not come to her rescue. In contrast to other village contexts, in the pastor's school other children's contributions in the form of whispers or prompts, are neither rewarded nor encouraged.

What is striking about the activity of reading the Pi Tautau is that what we had

seen in the village as predominantly an Anglophile practice has become conceptualized in California as a powerful symbol of Samoan culture. Samoan children in Los Angeles are exposed to the *Pi Tautau* as part of a larger effort to bolster the Samoan side of their identity. The *Pi Tautau* is part of the discourse of nostalgia, of bringing a piece of "home" to children here in the United States.

The relation between the *Pi Tautau* and Samoan tradition is made explicit in this excerpt, where a teacher articulates the reasons for learning the Samoan alphabet:

# Excerpt # 5. Sunday School in Southern California, Feb. 28, 1993.

((Teacher is holding an alphabet table while kids are sitting listening))

Teacher: Okay you guys now, why do you guys think it's important to learn our uh...our alphabet, uh?

[...]

Teacher: What are you? What's your nationality? ((another teacher comes to take a box from the table.)) Samoan....Okay? And you have to learn your culture, ((leans down to pick up an envelope dropped by the other teacher)) it's important for us to learn our culture as we grow up...because as we grow older,...if you're like me::, it took a long time to learn...how to speak the language....oka:y? Meanwhile you have an advantage right now you're only—you're you:ng...and we start teaching you guys the alphabets right



Figure 8. Children reading from the Bible during Pastor's school class in Western Samoa (1981).

now?...Then you will grow up and you will know how to talk how to p-put the words together and it will be easier for you to talk in your own language....And carry the American language at the same time...okay?

Does it work? It depends on what we see as the task at hand. As a strategy to teach children of Samoan descent to speak and read Samoan, it does not seem to be effective. The children eventually learn the *Pi Tautau* routine but they do not necessarily learn the individual words and their meanings. It is hard for most of them to recognize or remember the words in the *Pi Tautau* out of sequence.

Among other difficulties, the children are exposed to a variety of Samoan that is rarely used in their home, a variety called "good speech" (tautala lelei) strongly associated with literacy and the church (Duranti & Ochs, 1986; Ochs, 1988; Shore, 1982). When the children go beyond the words and numbers of the *Pi Tautau* to articulate whole Samoan utterances, they do so in the context of memorizing Bible verses, which are written in an esoteric register, full of special words, borrowed from the Samoan rhetorical tradition.

Nonetheless we have witnessed moments of pure pleasure and laughter while memorizing a verse whose meaning could not possibly be understood by the children. Such pleasure suggests that when Samoan children in Los Angeles enter the "church village," they know that they are entering safe grounds where they will find not only adult instructors, but also other children of their age who are undergoing similar experiences, who are struggling in similar ways with their multi-ethnic identity. The "church village" is the place where one does not need to explain oneself to outsiders. For a brief and yet exilarating moment, while singing a song or shouting the letters of the Samoan alphabet; home, community, and school come together. In fact, for the time that one stays within the boundaries of the church village, everyone seems to share the same meaning of "home" (Kondo, in press). The rest of the world is kept on hold.

#### Conclusions

In this paper, we have followed the history of a literacy tool, the Samoan Pi Tautau, over the last century and a half as a way of gaining insights into the relationship between "home" and "school" in a Samoan American community in Southern California. We have shown how a tool that we had previously analyzed as a vehicle of westernization has been transformed into a symbol of tradition and an instrument for cultural continuity. Our comparative data on Samoan literacy instructions in two different settings—a Western Samoan village and an urban environment in the United States—suggests that one of the main functions of language maintenance practices is the reproduction of cultural identity. The children of Samoan descent who participate in the religious school classes in Southern California are taught to recognize the Samoan alphabet and the words that represent the sounds of the Samoan language to provide them with a link with

an important part of their cultural heritage.

This study also suggests that educational research needs to reconfigure the relation between home and school and between home and community. The boundaries of home need to be expanded historically and geographically to include places of origin conveyed in expressions such as "back home." For many Samoan Americans, home is both here and there. Similarly, for Samoans and other groups, the boundaries of school go beyond the public school to include religious school and community extends beyond the neighborhood to embrace the "church village," a place where change and tradition can be safely negotiated.

#### Notes

- 1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1995 Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association, San Francisco, CA, April 18. The work presented here has been made possible by many people in Western Samoa and the United States who generously gave their time to our projects on child language acquisition and socialization. Special thanks to Rev. Fa'atau'oloa Mauala and his wife Sau 'iluma from the village of Falefa, on the island of 'Upolu in western Samoa. for their kind assistance in recording literacy activities and other kinds of adultchildren interactions over the last 15 years. In Los Angeles, we benefited from the help and advice of many people from the Samoan American community, some of whom joined our research team. In particular, we are grateful to James Soli'ai and Edgar Ta'ase for their careful transcription and interpretation of the video recordings and for their insights on language use and change. We also discussed the main topics of this paper with two other members of our team, Jennifer F. Reynolds and Jennifer Schlegel, who generously shared their intuitions and observations. The research on the Western Samoan community was sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the research on the Samoan American community was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education through a grant to the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, University of California, Santa Cruz.
- 2. We have used here traditional Samoan orthography. The letter 'g' represents a velar nasal (phonetically [a]) and the apostrophe stands for a glottal stop (phonetically [a]). The macron on vowels indicate length, that is, a is a short [a] and a: is a long [a:]. The colons are used for the emphatic lengthening of sounds, e.g. a::: ato. The vertical arrow indicates pronounced rising intonation.

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